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WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM,
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA
AND RELATED INTOLERANCE

Durban, 31 August - 7 September 2001
Item 9 of the provisional agenda

CONFERENCE THEMES

NGO contributions

Contribution* submitted by Bahá'í International Community

The secretariat has received the following written statement, which is transmitted to the World Conference.

* This contribution is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

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ENG

Racism originates not in the skin but in the human mind. Remedies to racial prejudice, xenophobia and intolerance must accordingly address first and foremost those mental illusions that have for so many thousands of years given rise to false concepts of superiority and inferiority among human populations.

At the root of all forms of discrimination and intolerance is the erroneous idea that humankind is somehow composed of separate and distinct races, peoples or castes, and that those sub-groups innately possess varying intellectual, moral, and/or physical capacities, which in turn justify different forms of treatment.

The reality is that there is only the one human race. We are a single people, inhabiting the planet Earth, one human family bound together in a common destiny, a single entity created from one same substance, obligated to "be even as one soul."

Recognition of this reality is the antidote to racism, xenophobia and intolerance in all its forms. It should, accordingly, be the guiding principle behind the discussions, deliberations and ultimate output of the World Conference against Racism.

A proper understanding of this fact of existence has the capacity to carry humanity not merely past racism, racial and ethnic prejudice, and xenophobia but also beyond intermediate notions of tolerance or multi-culturalism -- concepts that are important stepping-stones to humanity's long-sought goal of building a peaceful, just and unified world but insufficient for the eradication of such deeply rooted afflictions as racism and its companions.

The principle of human oneness strikes a chord in the deepest reaches of the human spirit. It is not yet another way of talking about the ideal of brotherhood or solidarity. Nor is it some vague hope or slogan. It reflects, rather, an eternal spiritual, moral and physical reality that has been brought into focus by humanity's collective coming of age in the twentieth century. Its emergence is more visible now because, for the first time in history, it has become possible for all of the peoples of the world to perceive their interdependence and to become conscious of their wholeness.

The reality of human oneness is fully endorsed by science. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, sociology and, most recently, genetics, in its decoding of the human genome, demonstrate that there is only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. The world's great religions likewise uphold the principle, even if their followers have, at times, clung to fallacious notions of superiority. The Founders of the world's great religions have all promised that one day peace and justice would prevail and all humanity would be united.

The contemporary realization of humanity's collective oneness comes after a historic process in which individuals were fused into ever greater units. Moving from clans, to tribes, to city-states, to nations, the next inevitable step for humanity is nothing less than the creation of a global civilization. In this new global civilization, all people and peoples are component parts of a single great organism -- an organism that is human civilization itself. As stated by Bahá'u'lláh more than 100 years ago, "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

Further, as explained in the Bahá'í writings, the oneness of humanity "implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced[Y]. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world -- a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units."

In considering the themes of the World Conference against Racism, a proper understanding of the reality of the oneness of humanity holds a number of implications.

It implies that any law, tradition or mental construct that grants superior rights or privileges to one grouping of humanity over another is not only morally wrong but fundamentally at odds with the best interests of even those who consider themselves to be in some way superior.

It implies that nation-states, as the building blocks of a global civilization, must hold to common standards of rights and take active steps to purge from their laws, traditions and practices any form of discrimination based on race, nationality or ethnic origin.

It implies that justice must be the ruling principle of social organization, a corollary principle that calls for widespread measures on the part of governments, their agencies, and civil society to address economic injustice at all levels. The Bahá'í writings call for both voluntary giving and government measures, such as the "equalization and apportionment" of excess wealth, so that the great disparities between the rich and the poor are eliminated. The Bahá'í writings also prescribe specific measures, such as profit-sharing and the equation of work with worship, that promote general economic prosperity across all classes.

Issues of xenophobia before the Conference in relation to contemporary problems of minority diasporas, the uneven application of citizenship laws, and refugee resettlement can likewise best be addressed in the light of humanity's oneness and, as Bahá'u'lláh indicated, the concept of world citizenship.

Further, the principle of the oneness of humanity exposes any attempt to distinguish separate "races" or "peoples" in the contemporary world as artificial and misleading. While racial, national and/or ethnic heritage can be considered as sources of pride and even a backdrop for positive social development, such distinctions should not become a basis for new forms of separation or superiority, however subtle.

Over the years, in statements to the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community has supported or called for specific actions in support of human oneness and the fight against racism, including:

-- The widespread promotion of international educational campaigns that would teach the organic oneness of humankind, urging specifically that the United Nations itself facilitate such an effort, involving national and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations.

-- The widespread ratification of -- and adherence to -- international instruments, which represent humankind's collective conscience, that might contribute to a comprehensive legal regime for combating racism and racial discrimination, especially the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

-- The worldwide promotion of human rights education, with the aim of creating a "culture of human rights."

The Bahá'í International Community has also sponsored or participated extensively in activities aimed at the eradication of racism and racial discrimination. Working largely through its national affiliates, which currently number 182, the Community has for example sponsored numerous public meetings, conferences, educational programs, newspaper articles, radio programs and exhibits that specifically seek to combat racism.

Further, drawing on the creative spirit of grassroots participation, Bahá'ís in a number of countries have established race unity committees, with multiracial membership, which have developed programs to combat racial prejudice and to create bonds of mutual respect among peoples of different races in their local communities. These committees have attempted to assist Bahá'ís to free themselves of their own racial prejudices and, beyond that, to contribute to the elimination of racial prejudice in society at large through extensive collaboration with leaders in government, education and religion. More specifically, Bahá'í communities around the world have sponsored numerous youth workshops that promote racial unity, held thousands of public "race unity day" observances, launched television and video campaigns to promote race harmony, sponsored neighborhood race unity dialogues, and participated in various national commissions to combat racism.

Those seeking to understand more fully how the oneness of humanity can be brought into practice might find it useful to examine the experience of the Bahá'í International Community itself, which offers a continuously advancing model for how diverse individuals can live together in harmony and unity. With a membership of more than 5 million, the worldwide Bahá'í community is composed of individuals from virtually every background. More than 2,100 different racial and tribal groups are represented, as are individuals from virtually every nationality, religious background and social class.

Despite this great diversity, which is reflective of the world's population at large, the worldwide Bahá'í community is among the most unified bodies of people on earth. This sense of unity goes beyond a shared theology. Individuals from many of these backgrounds have intermarried, for example, something which is promoted in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and/or they work together closely in local Bahá'í communities, serving together on its local- and national-level governing institutions. A careful examination of the worldwide Bahá'í community will reveal a surprisingly widespread and yet singularly committed body of people who are consciously creating a global culture, one that emphasizes peace, justice and sustainable development, and puts no group in a position of superiority.

Bahá'ís believe that their own success at building a unified community stems solely from its inspiration by the spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, who wrote extensively about the importance of unity, the reality of oneness, and the imperative need for creating a peaceful world civilization. More than 100 years ago, He wrote the following, which stands as a cornerstone of Bahá'í belief:

"O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest."